

Book Review: Mark Langan, Neo-Colonialism and the Poverty of 'Development' in Africa (2018)

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Book Reviews

Langan, Mark (2018), *Neo-Colonialism and the Poverty of 'Development' in Africa*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-319-58570-3 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-319-58571-0 (ebook), XV+253 pages

In *Neo-Colonialism and the Poverty of 'Development' in Africa*, Mark Langan revisits Nkrumah's (1965) concept of "neo-colonialism" to test whether it "does help us to analyse certain problems associated with current 'development' interventions by foreign actors in Africa" (2). Revisiting the reality of colonialism and its perceived contemporary new form is often regarded as a hindrance to Africa's current development discourse, since its invocation pits Africa against foreign powers' interests on the continent. The eight-chapter book acknowledges this by emphasising how neo-colonialism "is now often regarded as an outmoded concept in International Relations and Development Studies" (1). Nonetheless, the gift of the book is to systematically test the relevance of Nkrumah's thesis of the existence of a new form of colonialism in postcolonial Africa.

The first chapter revisits neo-colonialism, and makes a case for why the concept first applied in the context of the continent's development in the postcolonial era about six decades ago is still relevant in analysing the contemporary development discourse on Africa. It first examines Nkrumah's view as well as other scholars' work on neo-colonialism. It then proceeds to demonstrate how the existing literature on neo-patrimonialism has become useful in explaining the current state of external donor–Africa relations, and also in describing the apparent failure of the continent's development efforts hitherto. In addition, it highlights analogies between dependency theories and neo-colonialism theses to argue that whereas the former focus on unequal patterns of economic exchange in North–South relations, the latter hone in, conversely, more on the political objectives of such economic exchanges – and on foreign actors' interests and behaviour in the Global South.

The ensuing chapters then explore neo-colonialism and Africa's development through the respective lenses of foreign powers, development actors, donors, and corporatist interests in Africa. Chapter two specifically examines the interplay between foreign companies and neo-colonialism. Following Nkrumah's identification of multinational corporations and foreign donors as agents of neo-colonialism, it uses foreign investments in the oil and agribusiness sectors as cases to empirically examine

how these investments are primed to pursue a neo-colonialist agenda – and, in doing so, reaffirm Nkrumah’s original proposition.

Chapters three and four focus on the mechanisms of Western aid programmes as well as donor interventionism and the emergence of “new” development aid actors, respectively. Chapter three analyses the motives behind the giving of Western aid so as to test Nkrumah’s thesis that it is a disguised form of colonialism. It specifically examines three forms of Western assistance (project aid, budget support, and blending aid) to conclude that such types of aid are just another form of exploitation – as envisaged by Nkrumah – rather than means of advancing the outwardly stated altruistic intentions. Chapter four examines the economic aid of emerging powers, notably China’s significant interests and Turkey’s recent involvement in Africa. After an analysis of China’s resource-centred investment in Zambia as well as Angola, and Turkey’s new interventionist approach, the chapter’s main conclusion is that China and Turkey – who present themselves as trusted partners in South–South cooperation – are both acting ultimately out of self-interest in their respective African interventionist policies.

Using existing trade agreements between Africa and the European Union as a case study, the fifth chapter scrutinises, meanwhile, how exactly foreign trade is linked to exploitation. It concludes by corroborating Nkrumah’s assertion that unfair trade deals are a “device” for entrenching neo-colonialism (138–141). Chapters six and seven then move away from the economic aspect of neo-colonialism to analyse how security interventionism and United Nations development agendas are equally complicit in entrenching the patterns of neo-colonialism, in contrast to that body’s constant justification of the need for policy and development interventions on the basis of international responsibility. Chapter six delves into the nexus between neo-colonialism and the “securitisation of development” (150) (i.e. Western donor aid-giving and policy interventions, for example on migration) and the potential violation of state sovereignty during foreign military interventions in conflicts; the seventh chapter, meanwhile, queries the implications of pro-poor development initiatives on the ground. It specifically surveys two cardinal goals of UN development interventions: namely, “Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Development and Goal 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure” (178). This is done to determine whether they do actually facilitate economic growth favourable to the continent’s poor.

In concluding the book, the eighth and last chapter considers how Africa can move out of the shadow of neo-colonialism and towards developing instead African-oriented solutions to its own development

challenges – for better and sustained progressive change. With particular attention given to Nkrumah's ideas on how to defeat neo-colonialism in whatever guises it may appear, the book corroborates his views by advocating the need for a united front in the context of the African Union and of civil society organisations. This is worthwhile not only for the pursuit of progressive development, but also for challenging the foreign donor and corporate influence that are detrimental to Africa's development.

Besides giving detailed insight into the concept of neo-colonialism, the book's strength lies also in its attempt to empirically examine the validity of Nkrumah's propositions in the present day. Yet, the book uncritically but significantly buys into Nkrumah's assertion that foreign capital is primarily a means of exploitation. As a result, it falls short of recognising the fact that globalisation and economic interdependence are a reality and that Africa cannot independently advance its desired development agenda without foreign trade and investment in its enormous untapped potentials and resources. In so doing, it insufficiently acknowledges the potentially beneficial role that foreign involvement (trade, aid, investment) can certainly play in Africa's socio-economic development. In addition, the book could have discussed in greater depth the different actors' distinct investment approaches, what they represent in relation to the pursuance of neo-colonialism, and, most importantly, how Africa can adapt its policies to fully benefit from these specific foreign aid and investment modes while simultaneously minimising the threat of exploitation.

As a final remark, the discussion of how new actors such as China have emerged as fresh interventionist powers in contemporary Africa would have benefited from a much more extensive case analysis of China's socio-political and economic involvement across the entire continent. For this, going beyond the analysis of China's – arguably country-specific – relations with Zambia and Angola would have been very rewarding. Regardless, the book offers much insight into the concept of neo-colonialism through a comprehensive analysis of its relevance in relation to contemporary Africa's development.

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